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Keeping Secrets in Committee

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IN RECENT WEEKS the press has featured a series of purported revelations about U.S. intelligence activities in Libya, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Angola, Mexico and elsewhere. There have also been leaks involving the astonishing run of espionage cases in the "year of the spy." The CIA director has publicly threatened the press and broadcast networks over intelligence-related disclosures. He also has warned two prominent authors and their publishers concerning forthcoming books. It is ironic — and dangerous — that revelations about the secret business of intelligence have become a fixture of the front page.

What is additionally troubling is the widespread perception that most unauthorized disclosures come from congressional sources, especially the intelligence committees. It has been claimed that certain intelligence initiatives actually have been aborted for fear that they would be compromised through the process of congressional oversight.

In 1976, as a response to well-publicized abuses by the intelligence agencies, Congress established two select committees in the House and the Senate, to perform the oversight function on behalf of the entire Congress and to authorize the annual budget for national intelligence programs. In order to do this the committees were to be kept "fully and currently informed of all intelligence activities." Thus, the committees are custodians of some of the nation's most sensitive secrets.

There is a certain plausibility to the accusation that Congress must be the source of most leaks. Everyone knows members of Congress can't keep secrets. That seems to be the working assumption of the media and cognoscenti of political Washington. As the world's most powerful democratic legislature, Congress tests ideas, values and policies and reaches decisions in public debate. Congressional involvement in the clandestine world of intelligence is seen as an attempt to mix oil and water.

If money is not the mothers milk of politics, as the cynic said, surely publicity and the ebb and flow of information is. Secrecy, by contrast, is the handmaiden of autocracy. It is no accident the first article of the Bill of Rights protects free speech and a free press.

How can Congress effectively oversee the intelligence agencies, for whom secrecy is a necessity? The answer is found in the operation and organization of the intelligence committees. The members of the Senate committee take their responsibilities very seriously indeed; they fully appreciate the sensitivity of the information they possess. The professional staff has been carefully selected and all have passed full FBI security checks. More than half previously worked for civilian or military intelligence agencies.

The committee offices and hearing room are in a specially constructed, secure facility. Physical access is limited, as in intelligence agencies. The need-to-know principle is rigorously applied to committee staff, and access to the most sensitive information is tightly controlled. There is a fully documented record of everyone — committee members as well as staff — indicating who has access to any intelligence item and when. I agree with the committee's former chairman, Sen. Barry Goldwater, who said:

"The Senate Select Committee in Intelligence has an excellent record on security over the years. Although some people refer to leaks from the oversight committees, they do not provide one single documented example."

The leaks are, nevertheless, real and they are coming from the executive branch. Let me cite two recent cases. A few months ago there were damaging press accounts of an alleged covert action plan directed against the Libyan strongman, Muammar Kadafi. A thorough investigation demonstrated conclusively that these accounts could not have come from the intelligence committees. The reason was simple; the committees had not been told much of what subsequently became public. More recently, news accounts described a purported covert plan to supply advanced U.S. surface-to-air missiles to Afghan and Angolan resistance movements. A senior Pentagon official was identified as the source and was fired.

Why have leaks reached such epidemic proportions? Part of the answer is an aggressive, post-Watergate press that prides itself on the ability to discover confidential information in the name of investigative journalism. Part is the focus of attention on intelligence resulting from all the espionage cases. Part is the time-honored tradition by which senior officials, from the president on down, selectively leak information to build public support or otherwise strengthen their position in a contest over policy. Deep divisions concerning this administration's increasingly heavy reliance on covert action have added fuel to the fire.

I also believe some leaks may be the result of a deliberate effort to discredit the intelligence committees and curtail bothersome congressional oversight.

What can be done to stop the hemorrhaging of national secrets? Clearly, there must be an unflagging effort to identify and punish officials who disclose classified information. Cabinet members and even the president must set a proper example. Intelligence agencies must accept that congressional oversight is a legitimate and necessary activity. The media must not assume it can always judge whether publication or broadcast of particular information will actually harm national security. A little humility may be in order. Government employees, the press and the public must understand why the government protects intelligence information and the very real damage done to the United States, and those who have risked their lives to collect it, when that information is disclosed.

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